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THE THIRD FRENCH REPUBLIC  
AN ESSAY USING QUANTITATIVE METHODS TO STUDY PUBLIC OPINION

Odile Rudelle<sup>+</sup>

This article explores the impact of voting procedures on election results during the Third French Republic. The combined application of Departmental list balloting with two rounds and "split ticketing" (right to mix names on the lists) enabled the electorate to adjust its vote according to the local situation. In comparing the regional distribution of votes in the 1881 and 1885 elections, Odile Rudelle reveals different strategies of voting, the working of the "Condorcet effect", and the electoral outcomes of "Republican discipline". She comes to the final conclusion, that the election of 1885 cannot be longer considered as an "upsurge of the extremes" but should be interpreted as a choice in favour of Republican moderation.

Quantitative history retained its original economic orientation for a long time. The objective was to go back in time in order to find the important statistical series put together by national accountancy and in doing so, to try to solve the mystery of the beginnings of French economic progress. Research has moved on from economic problems to demography, and from there, through studies of parish records or wills, to more cultural questions where, with all the necessary care, a historian such as François Furet wondered if, in the last consequence, one shouldn't look for the source of French development. This is why in 1971 at the end of a sort of assessment article about quantitative history he called for a "politico-ideological analysis of past societies."<sup>(1)</sup> However, while alluding to all the long homogeneous statistical series still unused in our archives, he neglected to mention the uninterrupted electoral series which we have since 1848.

Far from being an oversight, his silence seems more the ransom paid for the success of French electoral sociology. Can anything else be said after the pioneer works by André Siegfried which from the beginning made electoral geography one of the main branches of French political science?

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## I Success and Limites of Electoral Geography

The most valuable aspect of electoral geography is to have shown the stability of the principal electoral masses in France, lying beneath the disorder of everyday French political life.

Thanks to the cartographic method, the "conquest of the Republic by the Republicans", the opposition between the Conservative West and the Republican East, and the swing of the Radicals' "red" South towards the Socialists have all become accepted notions.

In spite of its capacity of synthesis, cartography has not managed to drain all the information from electoral series. Having a preference for geographic proximity or the political results measured by the number of seats won, this method leaves aside ideological proximity which is the sign of a common opinion, just as it obliterates the ambiguity inherent in the fact that one vote must answer a plurality of questions (By whom do you wish to be governed? What is the biggest danger to your security and prosperity? With whom do you identify by voting this way or, on the contrary, against whom are you voting? etc ...).

Coming from contemporary political science, these questions have allowed the electoral series of the first 20 years of the Third Republic to be reconsidered. (2) These years are particularly interesting from a standpoint of essential features as well as from a standpoint of particular circumstances. Essential features: these years when a still unsteady Republic was being established were also those of strong Republican victories, at first over the "old parties" which are the Bonapartists and Clerics and later against the new coalitions such as the "Conservative Union" (Union Conservatrice) in 1885 or in 1888-1889 the organization of General Boulanger's followers. During these years when the Republic was fighting to become strong, electoral campaigns were essentially debates of opinion, and these debates were more general as the voting expanded. The second reason for interest in these electoral series is the use of list balloting (scrutin de liste) (3) from 1870 to 1875 and later from 1885-1889.

The first period is well known: the list ballot was the means by which the Republicans conquered France. A quantitative analysis confirms what common sense leads one to believe - the movement of votes conforms exactly to that of the seats won. (4) Such is not the case for 1885-1889 where a quantitative analysis shows a big difference between the movement of votes and the distribution of seats, that is, between the state of public opinion and the political results of the election.

We shall first take a general look at the situation before seeing how the list ballot in the Departments created, thanks to the role played by the Condorcet effect, a political situation which was the exact opposite of that which its promoters wanted. Where they hoped for a strong majority government capable of backing up a four year ministry, the result of the elections was a Chamber divided into three hostile sections which would go through no less than seven ministries in four years.

The 1881 Chamber had been elected under Gambetta's name. After Gambetta's death Jules Ferry became Council President (Président du Conseil) in March 1883 with the intention of leading the legislature to its term of office and putting into law the major principles of the old Republican program. At the beginning of 1885, he thought he had succeeded: the preceding summer he had successfully carried out the constitutional revision which raised the Republic above the dangers of universal suffrage. The senatorial elections in January of 1885 were a huge success for his friends. And from March 20-24, 1885, his Minister of the Interior Waldeck-Rousseau had the idea of list balloting voted in, which for him was to become the "means of a peaceful conquest of France by the Republicans". (5) Jules Ferry was hardly enthusiastic for this reform recommended by Gambetta. However, he was satisfied because he obtained the legislation of the procedure he had already used in 1881: freedom for the Council President to call for elections at his own chosen date anywhere within the period of two months before the normal date. Since peace with China was already started, he thought he would call for the election during the summer and thus succeed in having his policies ratified by universal suffrage.

Such was not to be, as is known. On March 30, 1885, Clemenceau used a telegram sent by General Brière de l'Isle to overthrow the ministry. Strengthened by this long-desired overthrow, Clemenceau engaged himself a second time in a six month electoral campaign whose main theme was war: civil war which would be brought on by the Conservatives, these inheritors of the "Versailles" Assembly who eradicated the Commune, and war on the outside which the Republicans on Ferry's side wanted to continue if they came back to the power from which they had been ousted on March 30th.

Without reaching Clemenceau's expectations, the elections of October 4th and 18th in 1885 were immediately interpreted as a disavowal of the policies of the preceding legislature: the Moderate Republicans fell from 412 to 222 seats and found themselves surrounded by 144 Radicals (instead of 40) and by 201 Conservatives (instead of 90). This is what the commentators of that time called an "upsurge of the extremes", although, as we will show, it was in reality a massive transfer, with peace being the goal, from the Left Center towards the Right Center.

How can this swing be explained? By the working of this very special kind of voting procedure which is the Departmental list balloting with two rounds and the right to mix names on the lists ("split-ticketing"). Being an election by absolute majority, it is very hard on minority parties which are eliminated without pity. A two-round voting process favors those who have alliances with other parties and who can turn a small advance into a big one when they have a plurality of the votes after the first round. But, being a vote by lists with the right to split-ticket voting, it also allows voters to eliminate certain names on one list and to add names from neighboring (or even opposite) lists so that an entirely new list is created, comprised of adversaries between which the voter signifies his refusal to choose. Actually this method of voting, which was thought to bring about the election of homogeneous lists in the Departments, had the opposite effect from the beginning in nine Departments out of 87 where a heterogeneous list was elected.

Being a paradox, this result was the starting point for a series of questions which have lead from the movement of seats won to the movement of votes in order to take the pulse of deep-seated public opinion. Attention was called immediately to two observations: on the one hand, the spread of split-ticket voting which concerned 61 of the 87 Departments in the first round, and, on the other hand, the importance, from one round to another, of transfer voting between the two Centers. Such behavior caused the traditional explanation of "upsurge of the extremes" to be moderated. On the contrary, it appeared that by voting simultaneously for adversaries in the Chamber or by changing sides during the two weeks between the first and second rounds, universal suffrage was showing how little it cared about the debates of ideas which the extremes delighted in. This difference between political professionals - those who have the monopoly on speaking out - and the masses voting in universal suffrage who can speak out only by means of their votes, brought about a questioning of the traditional cartographic method which was founded on the fact that those elected were adequated with those who elected them.

If the desired goal was to understand the mechanism which created this discrepancy between the movement of votes and the movement of seats, the only way to do this was to group Departments having the same behavior and then to compare these different types of Departments. And this was even easier because, since it was list balloting on the level of Departments, there was a vote as free as possible from local considerations for the first time since 1875.

In other words, the cartographic method based on geographic proximity had to be abandoned for a more abstract method based on ideological proximity.

## II A Politico-Ideological Analysis of the 1885 Elections

To carry out this analysis the electorate has been considered as a whole. A little like a ball of mercury which, when it is hit, is divided into smaller balls which seek to recombine immediately afterwards. This way of looking at the election, like a push to be taken, has made it easy to understand that in 1885 at least, the fundamental question was one of security: threatened by memories of civil war which the professional politicians kept bringing to mind, or by more or less imaginary plans for outside war, the electorate put its back to the wind, trying to fight the storm in such a way that at the end of the campaign it would be in a position of optimum stability. This will be particularly clear in the second round of voting when the electorate had to express itself in the confines of the constrained limits remaining after the first round.

The First Round: October 4, 1885

After the first round, the 87 Departments can be divided into four groups:

- the first(6) is the group of 20 Departments where the Conservatives won all 148 seats in the first round on October 4, 1885.
- the second(7) is the mixed group of 20 Departments where 27 Conservatives and 22 Republicans were elected simultaneously and where the profile of the lists (for example the existence of a Left Center list) foreshadows an important transfer from one Center to the other for the second round.
- the third(8) is the group of 25 Departments where the Republicans have a majority in the first round and 102 Deputies are elected out of the 175 seats up for voting.
- the fourth(9) is the group of 22 Departments where the division between Conservatives, Moderate Republicans, and Radical Republicans is so strong that a whole new round of voting will be needed.

Table 1: Voting Participation and Election Returns 1881/1885  
(First Ballot)

|           | Registered<br>Voters | Participating<br>Voters | Republicans                              | Conservatives | Elected         |                 |                |
|-----------|----------------------|-------------------------|--|---------------|-----------------|-----------------|----------------|
|           | 1885                 | 1881 / 85               | 1881/85                                  | 1881/85       | Rd <sup>1</sup> | Rp <sup>2</sup> | C <sup>3</sup> |
| Group I   | 2,697,133            | 72.5/79.2               | 39.6/34.9<br>(Rd <sup>1</sup> - 0.5)     | 32.1./44.8    | 0               | 0               | 148            |
| Group II  | 2,074, 925           | 73.8/81.0               | 47.1/46.5<br>(Rd <sup>1</sup> - 1,6)     | 22.7/39.5     | 0               | 22              | 27             |
| Group III | 3,052,835            | 63.0/76.1               | 55.5/55.2<br>(Rd <sup>1</sup> 2.6/14.3)  | 6.4/26.3      | 35              | 67              | 0              |
| Group IV  | 2,389,769            | 62.4/73.5               | 52.5/47.0<br>(Rd <sup>1</sup> 13.4/20.6) | 7.7/28.5      | 0               | 0               | 0              |
| Total     | 10,214,662           | 70.5/77.1               | 50.3/43.6                                | 17.5/35.4     | 35              | 89              | 175            |

- 1 Radicals,
- 2 Republicans
- 3 Conservatives

Several immediate observations can be drawn from the above table - observations which are even more informative when compared with the 1881 results. The most outstanding fact is the rise of the Conservatives (+ 17.1) which is caused, for one half, by the rise in voter participation (+ 6.7) and, for the other half, by the fall of the Republicans (- 6.7). The Fact that the big political success of the Conservatives (148 seats won) comes in the 20 Departments where, on the one hand, the Conservatives already did their best in 1881 and where, on the other hand, the Radicals do not exist, disapproves the traditional opinion whereby "the division of the Republicans creates Conservative success." Conservative success in the first round comes from the combination of a stronger voting participation and of a

massive transfer of Moderate Republican votes to Conservative candidates. The fact that numerous Conservative voters in 1885 had voted Republican in 1881 (that year in which the Conservatives seriously lost ground), but probably also in 1876 and 1877 (year of the combat between Clerics and Republicans) forces one to seriously moderate the traditional analysis about the "reactionary" aspect of the Conservative vote. In simpler terms, it was a protest vote, a criticizing vote against a Republican government whose foreign intervention policies were disapproved. It was a vote for peace, in no way a fighting vote against the Republican form of government.

An analysis of the second group brings one to the same conclusions. The second group is the mixed group, the one where 3 % of the voters voted a split-ticket: a proportion which is three times bigger than that of the rest of France. What then are the characteristics of this group which has trouble choosing between the Conservative and the Republican sides? A comparison with the three other groups shows that group II is closer to group I than to groups III or IV. It is close to group I by the percentage of voter participation and by the strength of the Conservatives who even in 1881 never went below 20 % of the registered voters (as compared to less than 10 % in groups III and IV). Here in group II, there is no Republican transfer to the Conservatives from 1881 to 1885, but rather a simultaneous vote for both Republicans and Conservatives. Thus, there is a heterogeneous representation, shared by Conservative and Republican Deputies who are simply notified that they must come to an understanding with each other.

Therefore it can be said that the 175 Conservative Deputies elected in the first round of voting are not at all the result of an "upsurge of the extremes" nor of a call for revenge against the Republicans. On the contrary they are the result of a transfer between the left Center and the Right Center; a transfer which, thanks to the effect of an absolute majority type of voting - "to the victor go all the spoils", was extremely valorized from the standpoint of political representation.

However, the effect of this transfer does not stop there. In groups III and IV the same movement between the two centers would result in an extraordinary increase coming from slight Radical progress. How does this work? By the Condorcet effect which is a sort of optical illusion which has as an outcome the fact that the number of seats won differs from the movement shown at the level of votes.

The Condorcet effect, analyzed by the mathematician in Parliamentary voting, comes into play when, in a succession of voting (in this case the two rounds), a three branch decision (in this case, the choice between Conservatives, Moderate Republicans, and Radical Republicans) and a process of elimination (in this case what Clemenceau will call "Republican discipline") come together. In this particular instances, the Conservatives' progress caused by the movement from the Left to the Right by moderate voters will cause the order of priority within the Republican family to be reversed and therefore, the Radicals will find themselves at the top although their true progress was in reality very slim.

As an example, look at the seven Departments in group IV where Conservative progress put them in the lead after the first round (Ariège, Aude, Cher, Gard, Jura, Nièvre, Vaucluse):

Table 2: Election Returns in Seven Type IV Departments 1881/1885

|            | Registered<br>Voters | Conservatives |         | Mod. Rep. |         | Rad. Rep. |         |
|------------|----------------------|---------------|---------|-----------|---------|-----------|---------|
|            |                      | 1881          | 1885    | 1881      | 1885    | 1881      | 1885    |
| Total      | 665,462              | 71,255        | 218,114 | 208,047   | 124,915 | 140,720   | 164,694 |
| Percentage |                      | 14.9          | 32.7    | 31.3      | 18.7    | 21.1      | 24.7    |

In these Departments in four years, the Radicals gain 24.000 votes or three percentage points which puts these Departments within the national average. In itself, it is a small movement, there is not a landslide. A fact which will completely change the meaning of the slight Radical progress is the Moderate Republicans fall apart, which benefits the Conservatives who triple their number. The consequence of the Moderates' fall is the reversal of positions within the Republican family where the Radicals rise from 40.3% to 56.8 %, that is to say, from a minority position (which put them out of the second round) to a majority position (which will let them profit for the first time by the "Republican discipline" which Clemenceau created for the occasion).

Thus the process which will lead to Radical victory in the second round (23 seats out of 40) can be understood. It is due less to their own progress (+ 3) than to that of the Conservatives (+ 17.8) who, on the contrary will find themselves without a single seat after the second round. This is a perfect example of the Condorcet paradox which can thus be illustrated: When asked "by whom do you wish to be governed?", the voters answered on October 4th:

- 1) Conservatives: 32.7 %
- 2) Radicals : 24.7 %
- 3) Moderates : 18.7 %

But since, most of the Moderate Republicans will be eliminated because of "Republican discipline" (withdrawing from the second round and asking their voters to vote for the Republican list with got the most votes in the first round), the answer on the evening of the second round will be:

- 1) Radicals : 23 seats
- 2) Moderates : 7 seats
- 3) Conservatives: 0 seats

Thus, the final answer to the question is radically opposed to the first answer. This transfer from one Center to the other, which is typical of the Moderate vote, will result in an extraordinary Radical advance. And the second round will complete the illustration of the paradoxical character of these elections by giving the Moderate Republicans, who were the big losers in the first round, the biggest benefits of the second.



The Second Round: October 18, 1885

The second ballot took place in the 54 Departments where there was no majority after the first round. We will leave aside the part of the campaign where the Conservatives believe too quickly that the game is won, while the Republicans call up the threats of civil war. A look at the overall results quickly shows that there is a discrepancy between the movement of votes and the movement of seats:

Table 3: Variations Between the First and Second Ballot in 54 Departments

|              | Voters    | Republicans | Conservatives | Seats Won |     |
|--------------|-----------|-------------|---------------|-----------|-----|
|              |           |             |               | R         | C   |
| October 4th  | 4,635,000 | 3,078,263   | 1,747,102     | 124       | 176 |
| October 10th | 4,577,000 | 2,712,441   | 1,872,805     | 241       | 26  |

Voter participation is down; the Republicans lose 350,000 voters, the Conservatives gain 135,000, but 241 Republicans are elected while only 26 Conservatives. The explanation for this contradiction lies in the fact that the strong Conservative progress does not take place in the districts where it would have been politically profitable. The withdrawal of the Conservative vote in districts where they were close to victory (just as their progress in those Departments where the results of the first round would lead one to think that they had no chance of winning) is another proof of the essentially peaceful aspect of the 1885 Conservative vote. To be completely convinced, one has only to look at the pattern of each election which, in order to maintain its peaceful aspect, has to change with the local situation.

Six pattern types can be seen:

Pattern 1 is formed by Departments, where the Conservative/Moderate Republican duel in the second ballot is the same as in the first round: voter hesitation stopped the whole list from being elected in the first round. The two lists were therefore very close to one another. Slight Conservative progress would have given the victory. But this was not to be, as can be seen.

Pattern 2 is formed by Departments, where a Left Center list is withdrawn: the votes are split between the Moderate Republicans and the Conservatives who are the only ones to profit in this case.

Pattern 3 is formed by Departments, where a Radical list was withdrawn in order to give the benefits to a Moderate Republican list: the voters are satisfied by this because, in this case, voter participation goes up by three points. This is also the only group where Moderate Republicans, who are sure of victory here, gain points from one round to another.

Patterns 4 and 5, on the other hand, are formed by Departments, where in the second round, Radicals are running against Conservatives either

alone (pattern 4) or alongside a few Moderates (Pattern 5). In both cases Republicans lose votes and the more Radicals there are on the list the more votes they lose.

Finally, pattern 6 is not really meaningful because it only exists in the Seine-et-Oise Department, the only one to have kept three lists in the second round (this was the cause of a strong Republican downslide (- 5.8)).

Table 4: Variations in the First and Second Round of the 1885 Elections

|                           | Participation | Republicans | Conservatives | Seats Won |    |
|---------------------------|---------------|-------------|---------------|-----------|----|
|                           |               |             |               | R         | C  |
| 1. Duel in both rounds    | - 0.8         | - 0.1       | - 1.2         | 12        | 8  |
| 2. Left Center Withdrawal | + 1.1         | - 9.9       | + 3.3         | 21        | 15 |
| 3. Radical Withdrawal     | + 3.4         | + 0.9       | + 1.3         | 68        | 2  |
| 4. Rd - Rp Fusion         | + 0.6         | - 1.8       | + 1.5         | 67        | 1  |
| 5. Republican Withdrawal  | + 2.2         | - 2.7       | + 3.5         | 60        | 0  |

This table shows more clearly than any commentary the fundamental moderation of an electorate which wants peace, but also its extraordinary capacity for showing this desire by adjusting its answer according to the local situation. Conservatives win votes everywhere, except in group 1, where a small progress would have been enough to let them win all the seats. When the Conservatives come close to political success, the electorate backs off to stop Conservative progress from being an anti-Republic revenge.

On the other hand, Republicans lose votes everywhere except where they nominate the reassuring figures of government Republicans (Casimir Perier, Sadi-Carnot, etc. ...), the same ones who, being close to Ferry, seemed like the big losers in the first round.

These concurring remarks lead to the same conclusion: the October 1885 vote was, for universal suffrage, a vote of Republican moderation. The electorate wanted peace: both domestic and foreign. By the combined effects of the Departmental list ballot with two rounds of voting and the right to split-tickets, the electorate found itself represented by a Chamber where the power of the extremes was very strong. The Radicals wanted "the Republic to be democratized" while the Conservatives, forgetting for the time being their constitutional "profession of faith", asked for the institutions to be changed. The Boulanger crisis<sup>(10)</sup> will be born of this divorce between the maximalist desires expressed by the Deputies in the years 1886-1888 and the profoundly peaceful aspirations of universal suffrage which was not yet flanked by important national political parties.<sup>(11)</sup>

FOOTNOTES

- 1 François Furet, *L'Histoire quantitative et la construction du fait historique* (Quantitative History and the Construction of Historical Fact), *Annales E.S.C.* XXVI 1971, p. 63-75. Reprinted in 1982 in François Furet, *L'Atelier de l'Histoire* (The Workshop of History), Paris 1982.
- 2 Odile Rudelle, *La République absolue: aux origines de l'instabilité constitutionnelle de la France républicaine*. (The Absolute Republic: at the Origin of Constitutional Instability in Republican France), Paris 1982.
- 3 The "scrutin de liste" is an electoral system whereby each party proposes a list of candidates to fill the vacant seats in the district. The number of candidates on each party's list corresponds to the number of seats up for election. Thus the voter votes for the whole list of his chosen party. For reasons of simplicity, the term "scrutin de liste" has been translated throughout this paper as "list balloting", "List ballot", or "List voting". The particularities of this electoral method during the Third French Republic will be explained on page 5. (Translator's footnote).
- 4 J. Gouault, *Comment la France est devenue républicaine*. (How France Became Republican), Paris 1954.
- 5 *Journal Officiel*, March 21, 1884, pp. 609 and passim.
- 6 Aveyron, Ardèche, Calvados, Charentes, Côtes du Nord, Finistère, Gers, Indre, Landes, Loire-Inférieure, Maine-et-Loire, Manche, Mayenne, Morbihan, Nord, Pas-de-Calais, Hautes-Pyrénées, Tarn-et-Garonne, Vendée, Vienne.
- 7 Aisne, Ardennes, Corse, Charente-Inférieure, Eure, Haute-Garonne, Haute-Loire, Isère, Lot, Lot-et-Garonne, Lozère, Haute-Marne, Oise, Orne, Basses-Pyrénées, Haut-Rhin, Haute-Saône, Sarthe, Somme, Tarn.
- 8 Ain, Allier, Hautes-Alpes, Alpes-Maritimes, Cantal, Corrèze, Côte d'Or, Creuse, Dordogne, Doubs, Drôme, Eure-et-Loir, Hérault, Ille-et-Vilaine, Indre-et-Loire, Meurthe-et-Moselle, Saône-et-Loire, Savoie, Haute-Savoie, Seine, Seine-Inférieure, Seine-et-Marne, Deux-Sevres, Vosges, Yonne.
- 9 Basses-Alpes, Ariège, Aube, Aude, Bouches-du-Rhône, Cher, Gard, Gironde, Jura, Loir-et-Cher, Loire, Loiret, Marne, Meuse, Nièvre, Puy-de-Dôme, Pyrénées-Orientales, Rhône, Seine-et-Oise, Var, Vaucluse, Haute-Vienne.
- 10 The electoral analysis of the Boulanger crisis is the theme of the second part of Odile Rudelle's work, *Op. Cit.*
- 11 Remember that in France it was not until 1905 and the association law that political parties could start to be truly organized.